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THE FUTURE OF THE MALAY LANGUAGE

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In Western civilization progress has been associated with the important language of the day. Long before French or English were ever considered fit tongues for great administrations and a civilized way of life, Greek or Latin were international languages.

But now the West has reached a turning point. With Russian achievements in space discovery, many English speaking people are asking themselves if it would not be better for their children to learn Russian as a second language rather than French which is the language of a decadent power.

Similarly in Asia, there is a language which has reached its turning point. In this case, the turning point can be seen as the upturn of a cycle. Once Malay was the language of a great empire. Malay was the lingua-franca for an area which on the map of Europe would stretch roughly from Ireland to the Caucasus. Some modern linguists believe that Malay was spoken by a race whose descendants are now spread among islands from Hainan to Madagascar.

Western Imperialism destroyed the unity and influence of the Malay language.

To-day, the Malay speaking peoples in their search for national self-respect are also searching for this lost unity in a greater nationhood.

For the Malay language, this is the turning point. For the last 400 years Malay has lain dormant. To-day, it is a sleeper awakening. In the near future, the Malay language will play a role that no Western thinker could have imagined before the second World War.

Why was Malay dormant for so long? What are the main developments in Malay to-day? And what is the destiny of the

Malay language?

Not only can a language die but it can disappear in such a way that only the barest traces remain. Thus, Sanskrit is a dead language while the scripts of Mohenjo Daro remain unsounded to this day. Or, a language can go into a kind of stasis. It is not dead but neither is it alive and dynamic. Malay was not dead but nor was it alive and dynamic during those four centuries beginning in 1511 when the Portuguese imperialist Alfonso de Albuquerque arrived in the Straits of Malacca and ending in 1942 when the British General Percival surrendered at Bukit Timah in Singapore.

During this dark period - and for the Malay language this was its dark age - the social, cultural and political framework of the Malay nation was fragmented to suit the imperialist ambitions of the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English. The most severe blow of all was the separation of the Malaya-Sumatra region into separate colonies under the British and Dutch.

Western technology was used first to destroy any military strength the local people might display. Then the conquerors turned to their real objective. They began the systematic economic exploitation of colonies. They distorted local agricultural and demographic patterns to supply vast quantities of cheap raw materials and to provide a closed market for products manufactured by the colonial power.

The crippling of the local economy also helped to weaken cultural developments and to stunt the natural growth of the local national language.

Local education was designed to produce clerks and compradores who could prepare letters in English or Dutch and do book-keeping in £ s. & d.

The prestige language became that of the Metropolitan power. To build the facade of indirect rule the colonial power created a ruling class out of the more accommodating local

feudal potentates. The children of the local feudal class were sent to the Metropolitan country to become little gentlemen. When they returned to their homeland many of them despised their own culture. Indeed, some could not even speak their native language properly.

In such an educational system only one literature mattered. In such councils as existed only one language was used for debate. The one culture that all sought to pursue was the culture of the conquering power.

Is it a wonder that there were very few writers in Malay during this period? Those nationalists who insisted on writing in the Malay language were suppressed by a wide range of measures. To the Asian, it is interesting to note that to-day the Western powers often accuse other powers of using similar suppressive measures. Who in the West, will recall that before Hitler had created Buchenwald the Dutch were sending Malay intellectuals to concentration camps in places like Digul in the disease infested swamps of New Guinea?

Who remembers that the bulk of historical Malay manuscripts were plundered from Asia and now repose in libraries in Oxford, Leyden and Paris?

In a sense, it is miraculous that the Malay language has survived.

Perhaps, the worst damage to Malay has been done by a group of people who are commonly thought to have done the language most good. These are the so-called Malay scholars. Very few of them are Malays. They were the colonial administrators who when they were not too busy keeping the flag of Empire flying, studied Malay language and Malay culture. Hardly any of them were trained research workers, very few were qualified in linguistics. Their chief aim was to learn the local language so they could more efficiently carry out their imperialist aims.

For them, progress of the Malays or the Malay language was anathema. They knew only too well that a cultural awakening would be the beginning of the end of colonialism.

So these quack scholars put the Malay language into a strait-jacket. They did their best to fossilize the language. They imposed systems of grammar and orthography which were quite unsuitable. These were the only systems they were familiar with. Furthermore, they were convenient systems for new colonial officials to learn the language. To these inept people unfitness mattered as little in language as it did in land laws. They simply imposed systems that were convenient to them regardless of the consequences for the local culture or economy.

Little wonder that for 400 years the Malay language remained in a condition of stasis.

Who lifted the curtain of darkness? Unwittingly, the Japanese, in 1941. When they drove the British, Dutch and Americans out of South-East Asia, the Japanese little expected that their victories would cause a great upsurge of Asian nationalism. The renaissance of the Malay language is part of this movement.

Although the Japanese would have liked to replace English or Dutch with Nippon-go, they were too preoccupied with winning local support to teach Japanese adequately.

Their propaganda agencies gave a superb opportunity to writers and journalists to express themselves in Malay.

This movement culminated in the Indonesian declaration of independence in August 1945. For the first time in four centuries, Malay was used throughout an administration. Very soon middle schools and even Universities were to be organized with Malay as the main teaching medium.

These developments in Indonesia had their reactions in Malaya. Young writers broke the strait-jacket imposed on the Malay language by the old colonialists. New concepts and

new styles were introduced into the language and the whole question of spelling reform and systematic development of technical vocabularies became widely discussed issues.

Two important events mark the trends of the early post-war period. The first was the Language Congress at Medan, organized by the Government of Indonesia in October 1954. Assembled there were all the top ranking writers, language experts, educationists as well as many statesmen who had played active roles in building up the language in the 20's and the 30's.

The other important event was the Congress for Malay Language & Literature held at the University of Malaya in Singapore in September 1956. This was a gathering of 70 cultural associations ranging from teachers' unions to associations of students, writers, actors and artists.

Delegates from Indonesia and Malaya were present at both congresses. The main issues faced at each meeting were the orderly growth of the Malay language and reform of orthography. Besides this, surveys were made of achievements in the different fields of learning and the arts.

Both congresses were symbolic of popular interest in the growth of the language. These were no ivory tower congregations of isolated academicians. Journalists, teachers, actors and writers, including of course poets, are people to whom language is a living tool. They all have a vital practical interest in its development.

Recently, as a result of a treaty of friendship between Indonesia and the Federation of Malaya, official negotiations have begun to reform spelling and unify the language. Many of the official delegates from the two countries had played leading roles in the language congresses. The issues now to be settled by treaty are the same as those which were studied at the Medan and Singapore congresses.

Linguistic unification will benefit both countries. Malaya will be able to draw on the vast resources of Indonesia, over 25,000 published works in some 30 fields of knowledge ranging from air-medicine to zoology. Indonesia will benefit from association with Malaya because Malaya may be considered the birthplace of the language in its pure form. We must remember that to more than three quarters of Indonesia's population, Malay is not their mother tongue. There are 40 million Javanese and over 10 million Sundanese. Many of them speak their own language at home. But they have also learnt Bahasa Indonesia, the national language of Indonesia. This is the language of the schools, the administration, the radio, the films, and the newspapers.

But the Malays of Malaya have no other language. At home or at work they speak and write one language - Bahasa Melayu. This is the national language of both the Federation of Malaya and the State of Singapore. Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu are essentially one language.

Linguistic unity between Malaya, with its 8 million people, and Indonesia, with its 80 million people, will be further strengthened by economic or even political moves to bring the two countries closer together.

If we believe that the pattern of developments in Europe, Africa and Latin America is likely to be repeated in South-East Asia, then it is very probable that a Malay speaking version of Benelux perhaps known as UNIMA (Uni Indonesia Malaya) will evolve within the next five years. Perhaps within a generation the Philippines will join this union. Malay would then be further modified as the language of the union.

The trend is threefold - reform, growth, and unity on an ever increasing scale.

So the Malay language begins a new phase in its cycle

of development. In a sense, Malay is recovering its role of unifying island peoples scattered about an area as large as Europe. It is also an official language. This has been so in Indonesia since 1945, but it is only partly true for Malaya where English is to remain the official language until 1967.

Malay is the official language for international negotiation between Indonesia and Malaya.

Both countries have set up special agencies to develop the language. These agencies determine technical vocabularies, and also help to publish literary and technical works in Malay.

Now that Indonesian and Malay scholars are studying the language, and applying the most modern techniques of linguistic analysis to its phonology as well as to its morphology, there is every chance that defossilization will be completed very soon. Future language growth will not only be rapid but along scientific lines.

A new generation of genuine scholars from the West are interested in the origins of the Malay language. A number of texts in an old script carved in stone in Java and Sumatra are being deciphered. These belong to the 6th or 7th century and it appears that the Malay spoken then compares with modern Malay in the way that old English compares with modern American English.

The future possibilities are tremendous. We have seen that Malay is a vigorous language that four centuries of dark ages could not kill. Like English it has as great a capacity for borrowing and assimilating. Malay is rich with words borrowed from Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian as well as many Western languages.

Malay also has a vast technical vocabulary of its own. Many of the new concepts can be named with words that have been in the language for a long time.

The Malay language is rich with elaborate nomenclature of the flora and fauna of the region. For example, there are

names for each of the species of the large variety of snails. .
Most of the fruits, flowers and trees have names, many of which
are apposite and mellifluous.

Natural phenomena - from the weather to geographical
formations - have Malay terms that are several hundred years old.

In the field of traditional craftsmanship, from
architecture to boat design, there is evidence of technological
advance almost to the limits of the materials that craftsmen
have to work with. The elaborate system of terminology suggests
that such knowledge is not the result of haphazard events.

In literature, Arabic as well as Western modes are used,
besides the traditional modes, some of which like the pantun or
Malay quatrain are unique in form and style. Contact with Hinduism
and Islam has provided a sophisticated vocabulary dealing with
philosophical concepts which superimpose nicely upon the ancient
pagan beliefs of the early Malays.

Malay should be a very popular language because it is
easy to learn. Its grammar is simple. There are no elaborate
changes within words or systems of declensions like those of
Russian or Spanish. The rules are simple and there are few
exceptions.

When the spelling reforms are completed the language
will be written exactly as it is spoken and therefore it will be
simple to read and to learn. It does not have any of the tone
systems found in Chinese or Siamese. Nor does it have unsounded
letters as in French or English.

In Malaya, and even in Singapore where 80% of the
population speak one of several Chinese dialects, Malay is
becoming increasingly popular as the most convenient language.
Chinese who normally speak separate dialects - Hainanese and
Cantonese for example - could use Mandarin as a lingua-franca.
But Chinese in Malaya speak Mandarin only if they have been to

school. More probably they will both know some Malay, and so Malay becomes the lingua-franca.

Under the colonial regime many people believed that English would become the language of Malaya, as it is in India or even as it has become in the West Indies. Indeed, we have the ridiculous spectacle of certain Indian chauvanists in Malaya still making futile attempts to preserve the status of the English language here in Malaya.

This cannot be, because there is a genuine lingua-franca: Malay. English speakers who cannot use the Malay language adequately to express themselves are very small in number. They are probably less than one percent of the total population.

To-day, the rice-pot is becoming hooked to the Malay language. Entry into Government service and promotion is dependent on a good knowledge of Malay. Consequently, many people are learning the national language with the same enthusiasm that they pursued English.

In Malaya it is realized that national unity is an essential prerequisite for economic and social progress. Our plural society must be welded into one. In fact, this pluralism is but another legacy of colonialism. In their greed to exploit the resources of the region the colonial powers allowed in hundreds of thousands of Chinese and Indians. The immigrants provided cheap labour on the plantations and mines, and they also became the trading links between the European agency houses and the peasant producers. Many of these immigrants came with the idea of making a fortune and returning home but in fact large numbers settled in the country. Nothing was done to absorb them into local life. Indeed, they became useful tools in the divide and rule policies that colonial officials adopted to sustain their authority.

To-day, with Malaya and Indonesia as independent states, these former migrants have to be absorbed and made into citizens having a single undivided loyalty to the state in which they are living.

This is particularly necessary because many Chinese and Indians find it difficult to resist the cultural magnetism of their homelands which have become great powers in the postwar period.

Apparently, the centrifugal forces are not weakened by statements from national leaders of both countries that Chinese and Indians in the South-East Asian countries should not try to obtain dual citizenship or owe dual loyalties.

Nowadays, both the Singapore and the Federation Governments place great emphasis on promoting the national language in education and in the administration. This is because it is only when these diverse peoples are educated in one language, read their literature in the national language, and normally communicate in the one language, that there can be a united people with a single loyalty.

Publishers, newspapers and film companies are all aware of the commercial value of the Malay language. In the last few years in Malaya more books are being published in wider fields of learning. Malay language newspapers are more competitive and offer more variety to their readers than English language papers. For example, the Malay Sunday paper is devoted to literature and more serious cultural topics, while English Sunday papers are often filled with the tabloid trash found in the large circulation papers in the English language world as a whole. This is perhaps symbolic of the sincere desire of the Malay people to achieve a rapid measure of progress.

Looking into the next quarter of a century, it is reasonable to say that the historical role of the Malay language

is likely to evolve along the following lines:- Within the next few years the work of reforming the spelling system will be completed. Over 90 million people in Indonesia, Malaya, Sarawak and Borneo will not only use the Malay language more extensively but, much more important, successive generations will come to use it more and more intensively. That is to say, Malay will not only become the lingua-franca and the language of the Universities, administration and commerce, but it will also be the language of the family and of love.

Within the next decade, political and social conditions will be such that a vast Malay literature will develop. Much of it will be technical because of the urgent need for technological progress.

Within the next generation economic conditions will have so changed that 200 million Malay speaking peoples will be stimulated from every side by the tensions of an expanding economic system. By then too, national entities will have digested their diverse cultural elements. We can therefore expect to see a magnificent flowering of many arts based on a Malay-language culture.

By the end of the twentieth century, Western historians will treat the study of Malay culture and language as a continuous cycle of progress with a brief interruption during a dark age. By then Malay will have been accorded its rightful place in the history of civilization.

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